

# Gender Effect on Compliment Exchange\*

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Language does reflect the identities of its users and to use it in an appropriate manner is crucial for us to live our social lives. Compliment exchange, in particular, has been intriguing for me since it seems to influence our interpersonal communication tremendously. The way of proffering and receiving compliments may influence the relations of interlocutors. In addition, the seemingly compliments may function or be intended as request or sarcasm. In order to avoid the confusion, I would like to follow the definition by Holmes (1988), that is, “a compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some “good” (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and hearer.” (Holmes: 446)

The focus of this paper is differences in the way men and women use compliment in Japanese. The data were collected from two television talk shows—*Tetsuko-no-heya* (*Female interviewer*), *Telephone-shocking in Warattemoiitomo* (*Male interviewer*),

Examination and analysis were based on power (solidarity) and face in Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. Previous studies about gender effect on compliment behaviors in English (Holmes 1988; Herbert 1990; Johnson 1992; Bolton 1994) and in Japanese (Maruyama; 1996) will be considered and compared.

## INTRODUCTION

According to Grice's theory of conversation, the main purpose of conversation is assumed to be the maximally efficient exchange of information (1975: 47); however, in our daily lives, we seem to enjoy

the least efficient conversation instead. The speech act of compliments, in particular, functions as phatic communion that is affective and/or social rather than referential and informative. In other words, complimenting behaviors are not intended primarily for exchanging the necessary information but for showing affection and/or respect or a positive evaluation at least. This feature of compliments seems to necessitate the interlocutors to be aware of their concept of self or identity in terms of interaction or interpersonal relations.

On the other hand, language is principally a tool to communicate with one another; however, the expressed speech behaviors are not necessarily what the interlocutors intend to proffer. The socialized beings seem to modify what is to be expressed and/or how it is to be expressed based on the norms or rules of the community to which they belong. Consequently, the pretentious compliments may function or be intended as requests, sarcasm or criticism. Or in some contexts, compliments might be withheld as pointed out by Ryave (1998), partly because compliments are considered to be downward (Holmes, 1988). In the same token, some compliments, regarded as flattery, are just diplomatic and do not carry any truth. Therefore it may be impossible to grasp the real shape of compliments or to sort out which is a real compliment. What is a compliment, first of all? In order to avoid confusion, I would like to follow the definition by Holmes (1988), that is, "a compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some "good" (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and hearer." (Holmes: 446) Accordingly, the function of compliments is postulated to be "social lubricants serving to create or maintain rapport" (Wolfson, 1983) or "to oil the social wheels and increase or consolidate the solidarity between the speaker and addressee" (Holmes, 1988).

Even under this definition, there still remains ambiguity in

compliments. The most conspicuous ambiguity seems to be in gender comparison as the compliment exchange among men or towards men is sometimes perceived as a face-threatening act instead of phatic communion. According to Tannen (1993), men's compliments are report-oriented, while women's ones are for rapport. Ironically, Janet Holmes, who herself gives the above definition, examined differences in the way men and women use compliments. She hypothesizes that compliments may function differently in women's and men's interactions. In this paper, I would like to investigate in what way the gender difference may effect compliment exchange in Japanese, comparing with the previous studies on this issue in English (Holmes 1988; Herbert 1990; Johnson 1992; Bolton 1994) and in Japanese (Maruyama; 1996)

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) as a framework, Holmes organizes three functions of compliment exchanges. First, compliments serve as positive affective speech acts by attending to positive face wants and increasing solidarity between people. Second, compliments can serve as positive politeness strategies before a face-threatening act (FTA). This is called providing positive redress for the FTA. The third function is that compliments may be FTA's themselves as they may indicate an intrusive desire on the speaker's part towards the hearer or the hearer's possession. In analyzing the compliment behaviors, power, solidarity and face or social image of self seem to be crucial factors. According to Tannen (1990), the dynamics of power and solidarity are the basics for interpreting gender relations.

In Holmes's study, there is some evidence to indicate that women interact with compliments as a sign of solidarity while men see them as FTAs. She summarizes as follows (Holmes, 1988):

- 1) women use compliments to each other significantly more often than they do to men or men do to each other;

- 2) women use a syntactic form which strengthens the positive force of the compliment significantly more often than men do, whereas men use a form which attenuates or hedges on compliment force significantly more often than women do;
- 3) women compliment each other on appearance more than on any other topic and this is a topic which is generally regarded as most appropriate between equals, friends and intimates, least threatening, most gratuitous vs. required by politeness and most other-oriented;
- 4) compliments on possessions which are those most obviously perceived as FTAs are used significantly more often between males;
- 5) compliments to those of different status tend to focus on skills or performance, reinforcing the importance of female-preferential appearance compliments as solidarity signals;
- 6) women of higher status are more likely to receive compliments than higher status men suggesting that complimenters may be aware of the risk of discomfiting higher status men with an FTA;
- 7) men's evasive compliment responses more often take the form of a marked avoidance strategy than women's do, suggesting they are more anxious to avoid recognizing and responding to a compliment than women.

In comparing these items to my own data, there are some difficulties. First, the politeness system may be different in Japan as pointed out by Matsumoto (1988). Japan is said to be a deference or negative politeness country. Secondly, Holmes' study is quantitative; mine is qualitative. Instead of using the number, I analyze the data descriptively. Therefore, the above items are referred to in describing the data.

## STUDY

The newly-elected Koizumi cabinet in Japan selected five female

ministers for the first time in the history of Japanese politics. And the girls nowadays use masculine language. Still I am afraid that there exists some evidence for chauvinism especially among college professors. It is true that men and women are physiologically different and each sex has its strengths and weaknesses. Based on recent studies (according to the TV commentator), men use mainly the left hemisphere, whereas women use both hemispheres at the same time. For instance, because only women are able to bear a child, there should be physical differences. Because of the physical differences, some people say, men are active and women are passive. In this paper, I would like to find out if there is a hierarchy or only difference in complimenting behaviors.

### Data

Compliment data were collected from videotaped talk shows from television. Two programs – *Tetsuko no heya* (Tetsuko's room) and *Telephone shocking* corner in *Waratteremoiitomo* (Talk show on the program 'You may laugh') – are selected because the interviewers represent both sexes so that the gender variation may be exhibited. On *Tetsuko no heya*, the interviewer Tetsuko Kuroyanagi is a middle-aged woman. The host of *Telephone shocking* corner in *Waratteremoiitomo* is Tamori, who is a middle-aged man.

Some advantages in using the media discourse from these TV talk shows may be considered. First, there might be the possible authenticity in their speech behaviors even in the scripted programs because the conversations taking place there may come from the spontaneous interaction of real people. (Or do they memorize their own lines? Maybe the interviewers do so but it does not seem to be true for the guests.) Though their interactions are sometimes artificial or not completely natural, they are made to be even more plausible and more generalizable than the actual communication in our daily lives as the TV programs need to gain sufficient attention from the audience. In other words, it is possible that the conversations on air

may reflect the present social conditions in a crystallized way. In addition, the TV programs can be videotaped. The videotaped speech behaviors can be observed as many times as possible. Therefore, the parts used as data can be transcribed accurately, which enables the data to be valid. Videotaped data also make it possible to observe non-verbal communication such as smiles, grimaces or nodding. Videotaping natural conversations is usually impossible and even if possible, there comes out the problem of the observer's paradox. When we know we are taped whether audio or video, we stop behaving naturally.

In addition to the media discourse, the data from observation, my own data and questionnaires are referred to in the process of analysis.

## **Method**

In addition to the theoretical framework of politeness theory, the preference organization is taken into consideration for analysis. The preference organization taken from Pomeranz's compliment study (1978) refers to the phenomenon that after specific kinds of conversational turns, responses are often strictly non-equivalent: one kind of response, termed the preferred, is direct, often abbreviated and structurally simple and typically immediate; in contrast, other kinds, termed dispreferred are typically indirect, structurally elaborated, and delayed (Brown & Levinson 1987, 38). In her compliment study, Pomeranz explores the interaction of the preference for agreement with compliments and self-denigration. She notes that to agree with a compliment is to oppose a constraint against self-praise. In order to preserve both the preference for agreement and the constraint, various intermediate turn types, such as agreements with praise-downgrade, agreements about praiseworthiness but with praise shifted to a third party and return compliments, are used. On the other hand, self-denigrations go against the preference for agreement, opposing a constraint against



criticism of others. Intermediate solutions are agreement with self-inclusion, implicit agreement by silence or minimal acknowledgement. A feature of preference organization is that it makes possible a whole range of face-preserving or face-minimizing strategies and techniques. Additionally, compliment behaviors are regarded as an action chain, proposed by Pomeranz, which consists of ample amount of exchanges. Although I will use an adjacency pair in process, I would like to take out the data as an action chain. By so doing, each context is elicited and enables me to do a microanalysis of discourse.

## Findings and discussion

### Male interviewer vs. male interviewee

#### Example 1 Tamori vs. Koichi Iwaki

*Tamori is a popular TV personality, aged 50's. Koichi Iwaki is a popular actor, aged 49 on this day. The next day is his birthday.*

T: *Ima baikutte nandai motteirundesuka.*

How many motorbikes do you have now?

K: *Mukashi karano, bokuraga umareta 1950nendai tokanowo ireruto, 5,60dai.*

About fifty to sixty, including the old ones of around 1950's when we were born.

T: *E... He... Wa....*

Oh.. What! Wow...

K: *Museum wo tukuritakattan desu yo.*

I wanted to build a museum, you know.

The topic here is a possession, which is typical for male interlocutors, as indicated in 4) of Holmes' study. This series of interactions is perceived as an FTA. K may attenuate the amazing number of motorbikes as a response to T's question by pointing out the oldness of the motorbikes. T's intensive reaction upon the number of motorbikes is responded to K's comment that may be

perceived as a topic shift. T's intensive reaction is regarded as a compliment. For this reaction, K does not reject/negate nor accept/agree. Maybe he accepts implicitly but explicitly he deflects the compliment by using a strategy of qualification or explaining the reason for owning many motorbikes. The conversation continues;

### Example 1 – continued

T: *Sore wo doko ni oiteirundesuka.*

Where do you store them?

K: *Ie to sooko toiuka, sono ano shikke wo chanto dekiru basho ga arundesu.*

At home and at a storehouse or rather at a special place with where the humility is under control.

T: *Ho.. sugoine. Chanto hokanshiteirundesuka.*

Wow. It's great. You store them in an appropriate way.

*Nottenaiyatsu wa zenbu. Nottetayatsumo totteruwake desune.*

All of the motorbikes you did not ride. You mean you store all the motorbikes you rode, don't you?

T inquires about the storing place of K's motorbikes; K responds to it, adding the extra information on the storage place. His remark may be regarded as a show-off. For his remark, T reacts by saying 'Wow. It's great', which is a compliment. This is a talk-show but in an ordinary conversation, this sort of sequence may be perceived as an FTA to both parties.

The conversation still continues.

### Example 1 – continued

K: *Tottemasu yo. Nottayatsu teiuka, race de notte ne. Number toka light mo nanimo tsuiteinai yatsude ne.*

I do store them. The bikes that I rode or rode in a race. The ones without number plates or lights.

T: *E..., Race jo dake hashirudake no ne. He..*

What! You rode it only in a race? Wow!



K: *Notta yatsu wa tsugi kara tsugi e, norikaete, nottenai yatsu wa, sonomama oitete ne.*

I change the bike that I rode, one after another. I store the bikes that I did not ride.

T: *E.. Sugoi ne. Sono hiyo dake demo, taihen desu ne. Sorewa, museum tsukuttahooga yasuku agarukamo shiremasen ne.*

Wow, that is great. Isn't it expensive? It may be more economical to have a museum.

In this sequence, again, K answers T's question, adding the detailed information on the stored bikes. The reaction of T is also an impressed one or a compliment, adding the same suggestion that he should build a museum.

In this example, both male participants seem to have a power game. At the end of this talk show, T asks K to join his planned trip by motorbike. Probably because the topic is K's possession, he does not reject or deny the compliment but accepts it. As pointed out by Herbert (1990), the speakers give the majority of compliments to people of the same age and status as the speakers, which is the case of example 1 because T and K are almost the same age and status. Both solidarity and power are interrelated in this interaction. In terms of face K's utterances can be interpreted as an FTA. However, this depends on how T perceives them.

## **Example 2 Tamori vs. Yoichi Atsumizu**

*Tamori, an interviewer is a famous TV personality in his 50's; Yoichi Atsumizu is an actor in his mid-thirties.*

T: *Katsuyaku shitemasu ne.*

You are doing great, aren't you?

Y: *E! Boku desu ka.*

What? You are talking about ME?

T: *Ee. So desu.*

Yes, I am.

Y: *Iya. Sonna koto nai desu.*

No. That is not true.

In this example, the compliment by T is confirmed and rejected by Y, who is younger and less well-known. According to Pomeranz's preference organization, Y's response, which is against the preference for agreement, preserves a constraint against self-praise. The topic here is performance, which is indicated in Holmes' item 5) as a typical topic to those of different status. The next sequence between the same participants casts a different strategy.

### Example 2 – continued

T: *Iya, majime desu ne.*

Yeah, you are serious, aren't you?

Y: « coughs. »

T: « coughs »

*Maneshitemo shoganaika.*

No use imitating you.

In this sequence, Y responds to T's compliment that Y is serious by coughing, which may be interpreted as agreement or disagreement. Silence or ignorance is considered as arrogant or critical; while coughing is open to interpretation. Coughing here seems to function as a wise strategy for maintaining Y's face as well as showing deference to T. The compliment proffered by T is perceived to be the one downward. Moreover, the topic here is Y's personality and too private and so may be an FTA

### Example 3 Tamori vs. Hiroshi Katsuno

*Tamori, an interviewer, is a famous TV personality in his 50's; Hiroshi Katsuno is a shy but popular actor in his 50's.*

T: *Ma ga ii desuyo ne.*

This interval is good.

H: *Iya, sumimasen.*

Oh, I am sorry.

T: *Iyaiya, tondemo nai.*

No, no. Not at all.

In this example, T's compliment in the first line is perceived to be an accusation by H. It is possible, however, that T intends for it to be a compliment. H may distort T's compliment or want to show modesty following Japanese mores. Both T's intention and H's perception are not precisely defined. This ambiguity makes the communication interesting and difficult.

### **Male interviewer vs. female interviewee**

#### **Example 4 Tamori vs. Anji**

*Tamori, an interviewer, is a famous TV personality in his 50's; Anji, in her late 20's, is a TV personality who used to be a model.*

Audience: *Anji kawaii.*

Anji, you are cute.

A: *Arigato gozaimasu.*

Thank you very much.

This adjacency pair is between the audience (mainly women) in the studio and A. Since A is a young woman with a good shape, the topic of the compliment is her appearance. In Holmes' list 3), women compliment each other on appearance quite often. In terms of a power-and-solidarity relationship, this seems to be a pure solidarity among them. By addressing that she is cute, the distance between A and the audience may be shortened. The style of response is appreciation that implies acceptance/agreement. Therefore, according to Pomeranz's preference organization, a constraint against self-praise is violated, whereas the preference for agreement is observed. Almost the same adjacency pair is observed between the mainly-female audience and the young female guest of this talk show.

#### **Example 4 – continued**

T: *Karada yawarakaitte hontou nano.*

Is it true that you have a supple body?

A: *Hai. Nannande sho ne.*

Yes, I do. I do not know what it is.

*Nanimo yatteinai noni, kuttsuichau.*

Even though I do not do anything, my body can stretch freely.

T: *Nanimo yatteimaino.*

You do not do anything?

A: *Iya, demo ofuro ni haittatokitoka, kata ga korukara.*

No, but I do something when I take a bath, since I have a stiff shoulder.

T: *Demo, taishita undo shitenaindesho.*

But you do not do much exercise, right?

« A shows off the supple body. »

T: *Sugoi, sorrya, sugoi.*

Wow, you are great. So great.

In this sequence, T initiates the question of whether A has a supple body. To have a supple body can be categorized into either skill/performance or appearance, or both. In either way, this topic is related to the body; therefore, it is wise of T to start by asking a question, which is not direct but the attenuated or hedged style as a feature among males indicated in the Holmes' list 2). As pointed out by Wolfson (1984), a compliment on appearance to a woman from a man could be misunderstood. A's response to T's question is affirmative but she intentionally seems to downgrade her physical features by uttering that she does not know what it is all about. However, this remark is followed by 'even though she does not do anything, she can stretch freely.' Then T repeats her utterance for confirmation. This time, it is assumed that A notices that she mistakenly praises herself, which violates the preference organization by opposing the constraint of self-praise. Therefore, she meticulously adds that she does stretch when she takes bath. Here the power relationship seems asymmetrical because T is male, older and more famous than she is. The atmosphere is, however, very friendly. These compliment exchanges may function as solidarity, as

well. Both participants appear to interact with each other, trying to maintain their own faces as well as their counterparts.

### **Female interviewer vs. male interviewee**

#### **Example 5 Tetsuko vs. Yutaka Nishina**

*Tetsuko Kuroyanagi has hosted the talk-show 'Tetsuko-no-heya' for nearly twenty years. She is a well-known TV personality who wrote a famous book. She is in her late 50's. Yutaka Nishina is an actor in his early 30's. His father who passed away 5 years ago was an actor who appeared in 'Tetsuko-no-heya' a couple of times.*

T: *AUDREY de daikatsuyaku de irashite..*

You are doing really great on AUDREY (the name of TV drama).

Y: *Iya iya. Tondemo nai desu.*

No, no. Not at all.

T: *Iya, maa, anata no otosama wa ...*

Oh, well, your father...

In this action chain, Tetsuko starts to proffer a compliment to Y whose father she knows very well. The topic of this compliment is performance, which is common to male interlocutors. The response is to reject, which opposes the preference for agreements but observes the constraint of self-praise. Replying to this response, Tetsuko negotiates Y's self-denigration but immediately she starts to talk about his father. This topic shifting would not happen to the upward direction or toward the higher status.

#### **Example 5 – continued**

T: *Otosama wa hontouni okaasama ya okosama, anatatachi nokoto wo taisetsuni nasatteirashite..*

Your father really treasured your mother and his children or you...

Y: *Hai.*

Yes.

To the compliment of Y's father's performance as a father, Y responds affirmatively. This means he responds in a different way from the compliment toward him. Sometimes, Japanese people denigrate their own family members as well as themselves. They consider their family members as a part of themselves. However, here, Y clearly differentiates himself from his late father. There may be a gender difference. The mothers in Japan are expected to denigrate their own children in order to have a preference organization. To agree or accept the compliments about their children's performance, appearance or personality means to oppose a constraint against self-praise. The fathers may not be restrained in this way probably because of the distance of the relationship.

### **Female interviewer vs. female interviewee**

#### **Example 6 Tetsuko vs. Noriko Kato**

*Tetsuko is a veteran interviewer in her later 50's; on the other hand, Noriko Kato is a 28-year-old actress. She has been learning French in France.*

T: *Kyo, anata, totemo kawaii skirt haiteirassharuno ne.*

You wear a very cute skirt today.

N: *Arigato gozaimasu.*

Thank you very much.

T: *Chotto misete kudasaru.*

Would you mind showing it to us?

N: *Aa dozo.*

Sure.

In this example, T proffers a compliment on the skirt that N wears. The skirt that the interlocutor wears may be categorized into appearance or possession. The response to this compliment is again 'thank you' in the same way as the other young woman's (A) response to a compliment of their appearance. This response of accept/agree opposes the constraint of self-praise but preserves the preference for agreement.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Though Japan has been labeled as a deference negative politeness country (Leech, 1983, Matsumoto, 1988), compliment behaviors, defined as a positive polite speech act, are observed ubiquitously. Since a compliment itself is regarded as a positive evaluation, compliment behaviors are thought to be downward (Holmes, 1988), though the compliments modified by appreciation could be upward. The more frequent compliment behaviors of women based on Holmes' (1988) and Herbert's (1990) studies could indicate the power structure where males position the dominance. There also exists a clear difference in topics between males and females. Females both proffer and receive compliments on appearance; on the other hand, males both proffer and receive compliments on performance. As Holmes (1988) and Herbert (1990) point out, the male compliments seem to be power-oriented; on the other hand, the female compliments seem to be solidarity-oriented (Tannen, 1993). Further study on compliment behaviors will enable us to explore the hidden 'reality' of the human being as a social entity through language activities.

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